



Volume 35
Issue 4 December

Article 10

2008

Review of *Why Welfare States Persist: The Importance of Public Opinion in Democracies*. Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza. Reviewed by Allan Brawley.

Allan Brawley
Arizona State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Welfare Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Brawley, Allan (2008) "Review of *Why Welfare States Persist: The Importance of Public Opinion in Democracies*. Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza. Reviewed by Allan Brawley.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss4/10>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



but when they finally arrive at the conclusion, there are only 15 pages to guide the creation of a new national strategy. The strategic vision could have been described in a book unto itself. Additionally, providing readers with a more thorough analysis of the strengths and limitations of the present body of research would have strengthened the book's place as a meta-analysis. In spite of these limitations, the reader can take away an understanding of the research in crime prevention and begin to see the links between prevention and intervention. Perhaps this is the beginning of turning the ambitious vision of a national strategy on crime prevention into a reality.

Stephanie Cosner Berzin
Boston College

Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, *Why Welfare States Persist: The Importance of Public Opinion in Democracies*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007. \$45.00 hardcover, \$18.00 papercover.

What future does the welfare state have in an increasingly interdependent and unpredictable world? Is there any remaining evidence that growth in social provision is an inevitable accompaniment to modernization in the developed democracies of North America, Western Europe, Australasia and Japan, as was once widely believed? Will there be convergence of social provision among these countries and, if so, will it be upwards towards the Scandinavian model, downwards towards the U.S. example, or something in between? Could there be divergence, with some countries becoming more generous in the share of GDP devoted to social expenditures while others rely increasingly on the private market to address the income security, medical, educational and other social welfare needs of their citizens? These are enormously important questions, of course, since there is abundant cross-national evidence that the higher the percentage of a given country's GDP devoted to social welfare expenditures, the lower the levels of inequality and poverty that exist in that country.

The authors of this well-written and thoroughly-

documented book take us on a detailed journey through the historical development of theory and research on welfare states over the last half century, paying particular attention to comparative international dimensions. They bring an abundance of data and sophisticated analytical techniques to bear on the challenging task of teasing out the reasons why different countries and categories of countries which share certain key characteristics differ in the level of welfare effort—that is, the percentage of GDP—they invest in ensuring the well-being and life chances of their citizens.

Among the interesting findings flowing from the authors' analyses is rejection of the long-held belief that the performance of a country's economy has the greatest impact on public opinion about the need for social welfare services and the consequent introduction of policies that reflect that opinion. Changes in a country's political leadership also turn out to be less salient than one might expect. In addition, the findings of this study challenge the views of those who have concluded that the public is too inattentive or ill-informed about critical issues to influence public policy-making in a rational or predictable fashion.

While acknowledging that a complex set of factors influences policy-makers to maintain, increase, or cut back their countries' investment in social welfare benefits and services, Brooks and Manza present a convincing case in support of their central thesis that long-held social values, group memberships, political affiliations and collective memories have resulted in "embedded preferences" in specific countries and in clusters of countries with similar histories, values and traditions. These embedded preferences are consistently expressed through mass opinion polls which cannot be ignored by political actors and, in fact, are reflected in candidates' electoral campaign platforms and in the policies supported by public officials once elected.

Especially significant is the stabilizing impact of these embedded preferences on a country's level of welfare effort over time, regardless of the economic, political and other changes that have occurred in that country. For example, the countries classified by welfare scholars as the "social democracies" (that is, the four Scandinavian countries) which have a strong

tradition of high investment in social provision—collectively, almost twice the level of the U.S.—have sustained those levels of welfare effort in spite of the immense increase in prosperity and other significant changes they have experienced over the last fifty years. The other European cluster which have been characterized as the “Christian democracies” (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the Netherlands) are more mixed in their reliance on public and private resources, but they too have maintained a consistent and relatively high level of welfare effort over time and, contrary to expectations, have converged towards the higher levels of social investment in that category. The remaining ideal type, the “liberal democracies” (Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the U.S.), have consistently remained at the lower end of the welfare effort continuum.

What does this mean for the future of the welfare state in the world’s developed welfare capitalist democracies? The authors are appropriately cautious about predicting future trends. However, their findings speak for themselves and the implications are pretty clear. The stability or inertia created by mass public opinion, based on embedded preferences, seems likely to continue to ensure relatively high levels of social provision throughout Western Europe, despite the pressures created by international economic events and other exigencies. At the other end of the spectrum, the liberal model exemplified by the U.S. is also likely to persist. This is certainly not comforting for those who would like to see poverty and inequality eliminated or at least reduced in the U.S. If there is any good news to be taken from this instructive book, it is that public opinion *does* impact social policies in democratic societies and, as is certainly the case in the U.S., public opinion can change quickly and dramatically. In the past, our country’s embedded preferences gave way to the reforms of the Progressive Era, the New Deal and the Great Society when events demanded change. It could be argued that such a change is overdue.

Allan Brawley
Arizona State University